Johan Järte – Managing Director, IML, Sweden



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IML is an industry association for innovative small and medium-sized companies active in Sweden that research new pharmaceuticals and advanced medical technology products. Managing Director Johan Järte explains how the association tries to create better conditions for its members, the main hurdles life sciences SMEs are facing, and shares his expectations of the strategy being prepared by the newly created Life Sciences Office.

Could you start by introducing the role of IML in Sweden's healthcare landscape?

We deal mainly with the political, and sometimes fiscal, environment for our growing membership, which comprises 19 successful and innovative SMEs in Sweden. Sweden has an impressive amount of innovative companies thanks to the many key science hubs the country boasts which generate a lot of creative life sciences ideas. With this comes a competitive landscape of access to fiscal help when these companies want to go to the next step of the company evolution, in addition to guidance on how next to proceed. At IML, we try to support them from a political standpoint, especially in relation to the Medical Products Agency (MPA).

At this level, we advocate for financial relief for our members. A key milestone for the association includes free advice from the MPA offering guidance for our members, in addition to lower fees for conducting clinical trials. However, this progress with the MPA has slowed down, as a result of them deprioritizing the importance of SMEs in Sweden.

How have you approached this challenge?

To counteract this, we try to help connect our members with important figures in the industry by arranging meetings or offering education plans. Moreover, we are also connected to the European Confederation of Pharmaceutical Entrepreneurs (EUCOPE) located in Brussels. This confederation has the sole mission of giving a voice to small and medium-sized innovative companies active in the field of pharmaceuticals, biotechnologies and medical technologies at the European level. They provide us with updated information from the EMA from an SME perspective, in addition to organizing meetings with the EMA for our members to participate in for free. This is of the utmost importance because they are bound to EMA's rules and regulations, thus the need to have guidance from the source.

Our main task is to help these small and medium-sized life sciences companies, not only on a European level but also on a national level. Through our connections with the Swedish Association of the Pharmaceutical Industry, known as LIF, we invite IML members to take advantage of their network of experts. These experts are the best in Sweden and provide knowledge on everything from IP to clinical trials and pharmacovigilance, areas in which a small company with a team of three to four people may not have extensive knowledge.

How do you help your members fulfil the evolution of their companies?

In order for companies to go international, they must first conduct clinical trials. We have a huge problem with clinical trials in Sweden as their number has been decreasing. This is one of our main challenges to overcome. Even though Sweden is a small country, it is an ideal place to conduct clinical trials because every Swede can be tracked through his or her personal ID number. Thus, we have extremely good control of our inhabitants, including patients. Despite this asset, we have other administrative and bureaucratic hurdles to overcome in the healthcare system, and this needs to change.

One of our main tasks is to influence the healthcare system and give it support and ideas to create a better environment for clinical trials in the country. Additionally, we aim to influence the politicians to change the system to make it easier for SMEs to be a part of the ecosystem. These companies need to have access to patients to enrol them for trials in a timely manner. This is paramount, as many companies have a limited amount of time before they spend all their capital.

Moreover, it is ten times more expensive for companies to conduct clinical trials outside of Sweden, so something needs to change. Otherwise, all of the innovative companies and ideas will end up in a graveyard.

A significant concern for life sciences SMEs is to attract investors and capital. What do you think Sweden can do to attract more investment from abroad?

I think that the political environment needs to change in Sweden as we have been struggling to ensure capital comes and remains in Sweden. Although Sweden has a lot of good innovation, investors also look at the surrounding environment such as tax relief, employment benefits, location, the quality of life sciences hubs and so on. All of these hurdles need to be overcome before an investor will bring their money to Sweden, and they will happily choose other places in Europe over us, for example, France, Germany or the UK.

However, Sweden is very competitive to other European countries and we have a very good reputation. We have ranked in the top three for the past several years in the Global Innovation Index (GII) ranking. We have a lot of good inventions to fall back on, not only in life sciences but also in IT with Spotify and Skype as prime examples.

What do you expect from the new strategy of the Life Science Office?

I expect the new government strategy to have clear and concrete action points. A lot of people have been involved in building the momentum to ensure a solid office of life sciences, and we have all been pushing the government to create this. Moreover, I am expecting the office to broaden its reach to work with other life sciences issues. Sweden needs a connector to the politicians, especially from an industry point of view, and I think the Life Science Office is in a perfect position to be this bridge.

Life sciences in Sweden is a unique and highly valued industry in the country. From an export point of view, life sciences is the third biggest export industry for the country which is amazing! I hope to see the ecosystem be lifted to its full potential even more. This sector is a win-win for everyone; for the patients, which have access to new medicines, for the hospitals, who help to bring Sweden to the forefront of new therapies, for the companies and thus for the society. Stimulating the landscape, especially through clinical trials, ensures you get your money back, and there is a lot of evidence that supports this.

Looking forward, what topics would you like to see continuing to be discussed surrounding life sciences in Sweden?

I would hope to see the healthcare system keen to discuss ways in which its doors can remain open to stimulate innovative solutions. There needs to be more communication between the system and the SMEs. Currently, the system is somewhat old fashioned and falling behind other countries.

However, looking back, everyone involved has lifted the word “life science” to new heights. Back then, no one knew what the word meant. Now, everyone is talking about life science, especially at political events such as Almedalen. I wish that this interest and curiosity in life science will continue well into the future.

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